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The Studio Exchange™

Jeff Lynne

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by Danny McCue

PHOTO: ANDY EARLE

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Working The Stage Of Sound

This self-taught producer has managed to maintain his career as an artist while simultaneously turning into a top-flight director behind the scenes.

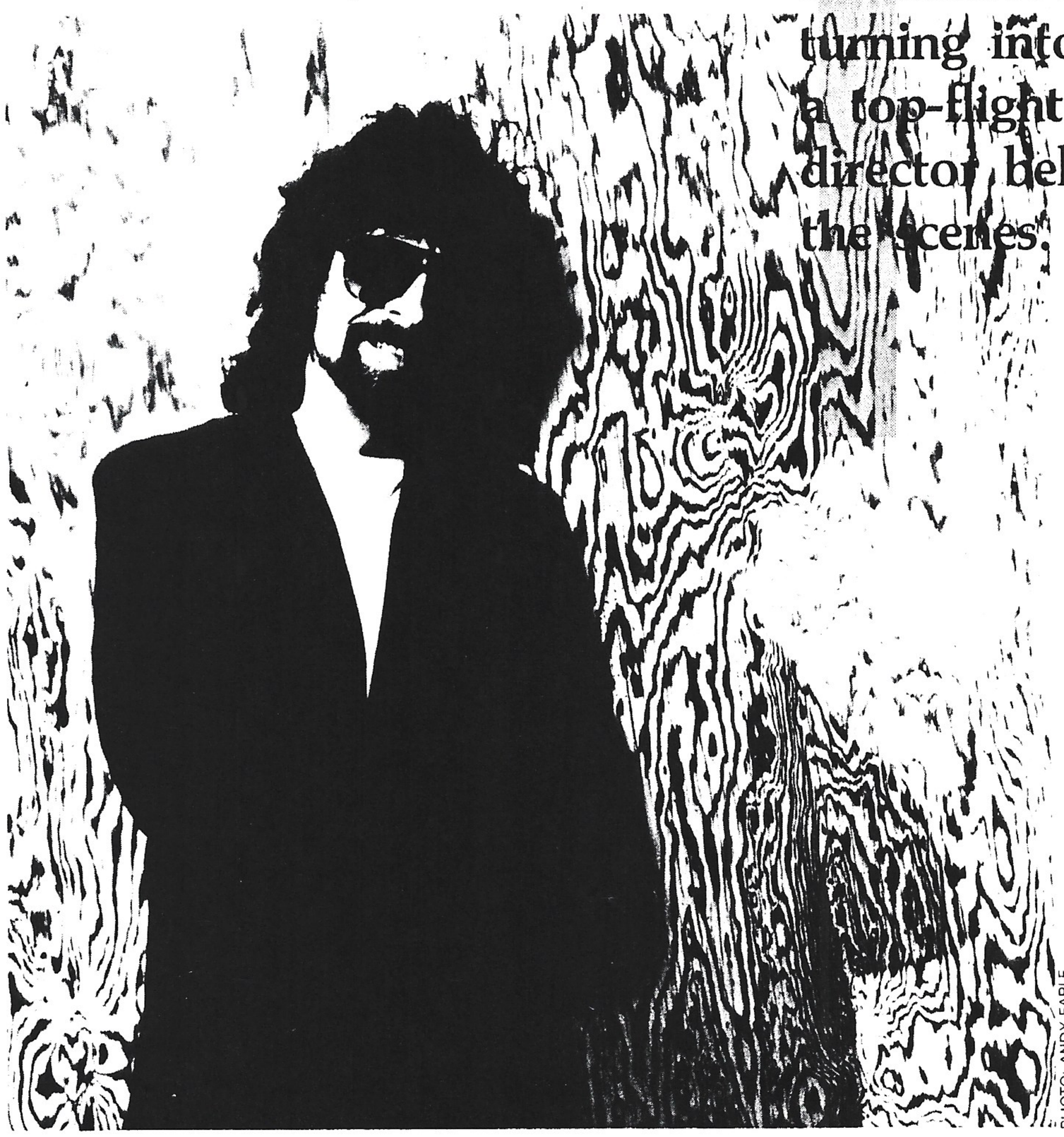

PHOTO: ANDY EARLE

JEFF LYNNE

by Danny McCue

Somehow it doesn't seem at all far-fetched to insert the word "extraordinary" before the phrase "career of Jeff Lynne." I'd trade places with him for a day — and, I'm sure, so would many of you.

Voted "Producer Of The Year" in the 1988 **Rolling Stone** *critics poll and cited as rock's "most in demand producer" by the* **Los Angeles Times**, *Lynne rebounded from the mid-'80s demise of his longtime band Electric Light Orchestra by throwing himself into a series of studio projects. He shared co-producer and co-writer credits on George Harrison's platinum* **Cloud Nine** *album and the double platinum* **Traveling Wilburys Vol. 1**, *and produced Tom Petty's triple-platinum* **Full Moon Fever**. *He also co-wrote and produced three tracks for Roy Orbison's platinum* **Mystery Girl** *LP, including the single "You Got It." So much for mooning over breaking up after the prom.*

This past June, Jeff Lynne's debut as a solo artist, **Armchair Theater**, *was released on Reprise/Warner Bros. Records. Like his other recent work as a producer (he self-produced this one), Lynne's is a sound marked by frequent nods to '50s and '60s rock 'n' roll and features his nearly trademark use of layered background vocals.*

Rather than work in a formal recording studio when recording **Armchair Theater**, *Lynne and engineer Richard Dodd built one in his home in three days, thereby continuing a Jeff Lynne tradition:* **Cloud Nine** *was recorded in Harrison's home, and* **Full Moon Fever** *was done in Heartbreaker Mike Campbell's garage. Seeking to fully utilize his large house, which dates from the 15th century, Lynne recorded the piano in his parlour, vocals were done in a hall, guitars were recorded in the kitchen, and drums cut in a room that during Elizabethan times was used to store boots. His dining room doubled as the control room. It is with the studio that we begin the conversation that follows.*

THE STUDIO EXCHANGE: *The first thing I want to ask you about is the studio you built to record your album in: Was it completed when you started or is it still evolving?*

JEFF LYNNE: No, it was just done. The way I treated it was, put the gear in and that's it. That's as far as it goes, really, and then you start working it. Basically all the rooms around the house were lots of studios, so that you could get any sound you wanted. I did no treatment to the acoustics or anything like that.

TSE: *Is it still set up or was it just a temporary thing?*

LYNNE: Oh, it's still there, but because I've had it built with E-dac plugs, it's able to be moved anywhere I like.

TSE: *As a producer, how do you establish a line between embellishing an arrangement and stepping all over it?*

LYNNE: Ah, that's a leading question! Well, I suppose it's a matter of personal taste. Really, it's one of those things. For me, when I hear one of my pieces it's still like, "Oh, that's one of mine," and I still hear things that, well, not that they're bad, but things that maybe I could have done better or tried a bit harder on. It's very hard to say where you draw the line. Sometimes I'll be setting a mix up and I'll think, "I wish I'd tried a guitar on that," or the mix is already done and I go, "I wish I'd tried this guitar riff on that," and then when I try it, just to see what it sounds like — after it's already mixed — and it doesn't sound good, I go, "Oh great, I'm really glad it didn't work, because that means it's finished." Sometimes there's an obvious end to it that you reach through trial and error, and sometimes you're just happy with what you've got and you don't even bother trying something else. It feels finished. That's what it is really; it feels finished when it is.

TSE: *At the point where a project is finished, would you say you feel creatively exhausted, and if so, how do you recharge yourself?*

LYNNE: What I usually do is go on to another tune and start working out parts for that; either guitar riffs or piano bits or horn parts — that's how I unwind, [by] working on the next tune.

TSE: *As both producer and artist on* **Armchair Theater**, *do you feel all of your intentions or creative ideas were fully realized?*

LYNNE: I suppose 99% of them were at any given point on the album, but obviously, if I thought it was perfect. . .I'd have to pack it in. But it's as good as I could do right then, you know, and I stand by the work that I've just done because I'm really pleased with it.

TSE: *As a songwriter, have you developed sort of rigid guidelines that you follow or do you allow yourself a lot of freedom?*

LYNNE: Because I was no longer within the constraints of anything I'm supposed to be doing — like, "Is this supposed to be ELO?" — I was totally free to do anything I wanted to. I think, or I hope, the songs reflect that. And I think because working with Tom and George and Roy gave me another insight into making records, making them as a producer and not as a performer, I approached this project with more enthusiasm than I've approached any other. Of course it drives you a bit crackers, being both the producer and the singer; you sometimes wish you can do better.

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PRODUCT REVIEW

Samson VLP Wireless Series

by Edward Rhoads

Before going into any details about the Samson VLP Wireless Series, first let me give you the bottom line: it is affordable and it does the work of systems that are not. The VLP Series offers a VHF receiver and three different types of transmitters, an instrument belt pack, a hand held microphone and a lavalier belt pack. I had the pleasure to try the VT-1G instrument transmitter with my guitar at rehearsals and small club gigs for about a month.

Having been an owner of Samson products, I know what kind of quality this company can put out. The question here was the price — could Samson make an easy to use wireless with a clean, strong signal that most starving musicians could afford? The answer is: Yes, indeed. The VLP lists for a measly $189.00. Normally a wireless that inexpensive sounds inexpensive. . .this one sounds like you're playing with a cord. Impressed? Not as much as you're gonna be.

Along with clear, strong signals the VLP transmitter features an improved battery compartment design. In the past, I've found a loose fitting 9-volt battery in the transmitter can determine whether or not you look silly on stage with tons of white noise blasting through your amp. Well, no more! The new transmitter design fits the battery so snug it will never pop out, plus the design has a handy "snap-in-place-space" for the mute/trim screwdriver, which is supplied with the system. This is a good place to mention that in this new age of active pickups and hot-wired guitars, Samson offers a sensitivity control on the transmitter to reduce overload distortion going into the receiver. This feature and the mute adjustment on the receiver are both controlled with the special screwdriver found in the battery compartment.

The VR-1 receiver is smaller than most receivers of this quality. Its front panel features the usual LEDs, volume and mute controls one would expect on a wireless system — although one added cool feature is that the VR-1 receiver can run on AC power (or batteries) with the proper DC plug.

So there you have it: improved design, great sound, simple to use, some interesting new options and virtually anybody can afford one. Ask to try the Samson VLP out at your local music store, you'll be surprised. For more information, contact: Samson Technologies Corp., 485-19 South Broadway, Hicksville, NY 11801, or call 516-932-3810.

The improved and super-affordable Samson VLP Wireless.

Music Minus One Performance Tapes

by Jon Wettingfeld

You Sing The Hits/Pocket Songs is a sampler tape by the company that invented "karaoke" sing-along tapes, Music Minus One. Clubs featuring sing-along tapes are widely popular in Japan, and the number of karaoke clubs is growing in the US. Performers and clubs are demanding a wider selection of material. Music Minus One's tapes attempt to meet this demand by duplicating the arrangements of songs by Sinatra, Streisand, Springsteen, Madonna, Kenny Rogers, Whitney Houston and others.

How do Pocket Songs sound? You Sing The Hits, a sampler of 31 of the more than 1,700 titles in the Music Minus One catalog, is a credible, energetic and happening collection of recreated tracks from hit songs. The engineering is superb, and even though most of the tracks utilize some MIDI instruments, the sounds are warm and natural, the drums realistic and the mixes dynamic and clear (the Motown and Sinatra tracks are especially convincing).

Reference vocals are recorded on the right channel, allowing the vocalist to learn the songs. When the time comes to do a performance, the singer has the soundman turn down the right channel, performing with only the background track.

Pocket Songs is well worth looking into for aspiring performers. While you may have reservations about singing to a track, keep in mind that many singers and performers are successfully hitting clubs with nothing but cassette tracks of their own songs or pop standards. Whether for practice or as a cost-effective way for vocalists to stage a gig, Music Minus One's Pocket Songs can create new opportunities for singers and performers.

For more information, contact: Music Minus One, Box 229, 50 So. Buckhout Street, Irvington, NY 10533, 914-591-5100.

JEFF LYNNE

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TSE: *Could you be as hard on yourself as you might have been with those other guys?*
LYNNE: I think so, because when you sing yourself it's so much more personal and you tend to try and keep at yourself until you get it as good as you possibly can. You can't let go quite so easily.

I did learn a lot from doing the others. I made them have their voices really loud and dry, and used no reverb on it so that you could hear every word they sang. By the same token, I had to do that to myself. I could've gotten into big trouble if I'd made a record smothered in reverb. They would've gone, "You bastard. You wouldn't let us have any, but you got it." I much prefer the up-front vocal anyway. I don't particularly like to hear people singing down a tunnel.
TSE: *Are you the kind of guy who can pull the proverbial musical rabbit out of your hat, in the studio, if you have to?*
LYNNE: I can. I'm not quite sure what it is when I pull it out — it might be a donkey — but, you know, I've done that a lot in the past, coming up with or rescuing a song at the last minute. That's just inspiration and desperation.
TSE: *What was it like to write and record with Roy Orbison?*
LYNNE: I have to keep reminding myself what I was actually doing, because it was something I had never dreamed of doing — perhaps in my wildest dreams, maybe — but it was really brilliant working with him. I'd just sit there with him, strumming along with him on the guitar as we wrote "You Got It" and "Look So Beautiful," and he'd just sing real soft. He never really sang out while we were writing. When I finished the backing tracks and he actually went into the studio, he'd sort of mumble along a little bit to get used to the phrasing and then suddenly he'd say, "OK, I'll have a go." And he'd sing and it'd be just this great big voice, booming, filling the whole room with this beautiful tone. You just go, "Oh, wow, this is it." It's like, "This is what I've always been waiting for, this moment. . ."
TSE: *Is there a certain something on the records you've done that you think defines the Jeff Lynne sound?*
LYNNE: Well, it's not a conscious thing. I think my records sound like me because that's my style. It's not a calculated thing like I have to have two of these and a half-dozen of those and one of these. For better or worse, how my records sound is just how they turn out. Probably, if I sat back at the end of the day and thought about it, half the distinctive sound I get is backing vocals.
TSE: *As a producer, it doesn't seem like you went through a period of making minor records or ones you'd want to hide away. . .*
LYNNE: No I didn't, not quite in that regard.
TSE: *Where'd you get your sense of what works, from a producer's point of view?*
LYNNE: How it started was, I got this little Danish tape recorder, a Bang & Olufsen, when I was in a group called Idelrace. It was only a 2 track machine, but you could bounce from track one to track two and add another instrument, then go from track two with the two instruments on, back to track two and add another instrument — you could do this forever, though at the end of the day you'd probably have to dub on the first guitar you did because you'd lost it in all the sound transfer. That's the way I taught myself to be a producer, using a stool and chair for drums and things like that.
TSE: *Is there a producer who's had a profound effect on how you approach making records today?*
LYNNE: My favorite producer is a guy called Joe Meek, an English producer, who's dead now. He produced a lot of fantastic records, real rough around the edges, and while I don't actually make records like him, I really get off on his style. I've got a lot of his old records, I collect him, and it's all jumbled up and distorted, but it's a great, exciting sound.
TSE: *A great deal is made of your having worked with George Harrison and Tom Petty, but what I want to know is, what was it like to work with Bob Dylan on the Wilburys?*
LYNNE: It's amazing, really, because Bobby's so instant. He goes in and does his vocal and he doesn't come out and try to guess what he should have done. He just says, "Yep, that's it." And I think that's brilliant; to have the confidence to walk in and just do it once, then listen back and go, "Yeah, that's the way it goes." I couldn't do that myself.
TSE: *As the producer on that project, would you just leave holes open for the individual guys to do their thing?*
LYNNE: Well, what it is in the Wilburys is everybody's got something to give all the time. And it wasn't like, "Let's see if we can do this" — we knew everybody could do it. The only question was where they'd do it. The great thing about the Wilburys is we've got all these songwriters in the group, sitting around with acoustic guitars, and there's never a moment of hard work involved. There's always someone there, if you're stuck on a chord or can only get so far in a song, to come up and say, "What about a B minor there." That's the way it works. Then we'll go on to the next part. We don't sort of sit around for days. We do a song in the afternoon, lay down the backing track, then Jim Keltner plays drums, we put on the rough vocal afterwards, and it's sort of done. What we try to do in the Wilburys is make records without it being a big, laborious thing.
TSE: *You're doing a second one right now, aren't you?*
LYNNE: Yeah, we've laid all the backing tracks down and got the rough vocals on, and we're going to finish it off in England, in July.
TSE: *Do you think you'll be taking your producer's cap off long enough to do a Wilburys tour in the not-so-distant future?*
LYNNE: We've talked about doing a tour, or at least some shows, but we haven't got any plans at all to do it at the moment. It's a thing that might happen towards the end of the year.